Isaiah 40:1-11
Matthew 2:1-11
Comfort and Demand

December 19, 1971
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George Frederick Handel began his monumental work, The Messiah, with a tenor aria set to the words of the Old Testament Lesson this morning. The passage is very gentle, couched in woodwinds and strings; "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, saith your God." On that theme the Messiah begins, and on that theme the Church down through the centuries has celebrated Advent. It speaks of a God who is about to intercede in the history of his people; a God who is about to act in a way that will redeem his people and give them a whole new lease on life. That, the Church maintains is what God did, in a final - ultimate way, in the birth of Jesus Christ centuries later. The theology of Isaiah 40 is Christmas theology. So on this last Sunday of Advent let us look again at what the prophet said.

For fifty years God had been silent. Half a century before Jerusalem was leveled by the armies of Babylon, and the temple destroyed. Another prophet, Jeremiah, interpreted the disaster as God's judgement on his wayward people, but went on to promise that God would act in a new way to restore what had been destroyed, and to re-establish his people on the basis of a new covenant. But then the exile happened. The victorious armies rather than occupying the land, carried all the leaders back to Babylon as captives - Jeremiah included. They were allowed a minimum of freedom in their exile: the Babylonians counted on the Jews being absorbed by Babylonian culture: the Jews - for their part - settled down in captivity to wait: to wait for that new thing Jeremiah promised God would do.

And then nothing: fifty years of waiting: fifty years of silence: a generation of Jews died in the interim. That's a long wait - to feel it we need only to transpose into the twentieth century. Fifty years - that means 1921 - that's an intolerably long time for people to wait for anything: particularly if you happen to be waiting for a God whose power, authority and very existence had been called into question by the defeat of his people.

That's how the ancient mind perceived it. Conflict between nations was seen in cosmic terms, and if a people suffered defeat, the theological conclusion was that the people's God had succumbed, or had been proven to be a fake.

Fifty years of waiting: fifty years of silence: fifty years of inactivity, In my imagination I see bearded elders pouring over the Psalms and Prophets, hoping against hope that their whole history wasn't a fluke. I see young men, with families, wanting to settle down, tired of waiting, tired of talking about waiting, impatient with the nostalgic meanderings of old men.

Then the silence was broken. Someone back in burned out Jerusalem saw a vision, and wrote a letter, and somehow it got all the way from Jerusalem to the waiting exile community in Babylon. We don't know who he was: only that his letter was included in the work of an earlier prophet and occupies the 40th through the 55th chapters of the Book of Isaiah. And the first thing he addressed to those lonely exiles was this: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended: that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins."

If you are a captive, and old man waiting, that's very good news. Literally in the nick of time, God's word comes to you as hope for the future. God is not dead: he has not been defeated: he still reigns: the promise will be kept. To an anxious, depressed and worried people that comes as comfort.

But then the prophet talks about some kind of strange highway through the desert: valleys being filled up and mountains brought low. Those are road-building terms, by the way. And to the exiled Jews it sounded very much as if they had some work cut out for them: hard, risky and dangerous work. It's one thing to hear that God is alive and well: it's another thing altogether to pick up family and belongings and start walking through the wilderness. And my imagination, at this point, sees those younger, cynical Jews digging their heels in. "Strange comfort! To make a highway in the wilderness!

Good God! Wasn't Babylon bad enough? At least they were making ends meet, the children were at school. . . . and they had security! And they were expected to throw all that over for a crazy highway in the wilderness? Out of the frying pan into the fire? What kind of comfort was this?" (Edmund Steimle, the Protestant Hour, December 1970, p. 12-13)

Their forefathers had said the same thing when a man by the name of MOses came up with a hair-brain scheme to walk out of Egypt - up through Sinai and right through the Red Sea, no less. Believing in God is one thing - but this walking through the wilderness is a bit more than most of them bargained for.

Well, that's a major Biblical theme that keeps cropping up all the time. God speaks a good word to his people and all of a sudden those people find themselves out on a limb, with Pharoh - or the Babylonians - or someone - sawing away: out their on the limb with nothing but these vague promises - nothing but trust and faith to break the fall. The Bible is full of that very strange comfort: just as men are about to settle back and enjoy the warm glow of God's love and their own salvation - they find themselves picked up by the scruff of the neck and kicked out into some kind of wilderness. Put more properly salvation - in the Bible at least - is never an end in itself. God saves men - in order to use them in the work he is doing: and that work is notorious for happening out there where it is dark and cold and dangerous.

So we come to Christmas - to that event in which God spoke and acted in a way he had never done before. And the word for us is the same: both comfort and demand, only we're not particularly interested in the demand at this time of year, anymore than those exiles in Babylon were.

But that's getting ahead of ourselves. Christmas does come to us as comfort. There is a goodness and hope about the birth of Jesus Christ that addresses all men where they live. It's a much needed word today. I guess there is no one who can read the newspapers who isn't a little concerned about the future, what with India and Pakestan: Israel and Egupt, Red China in the U.N.: and I know there are a lot of people more than a little concerned about

our ability to survive twenty five more years with out nuclear arsenal, and falling down cities, and obstinate racism and polluted air. So we welcome December 25 as Balm in Gilead. We need to know that God is alive and well and that there is always hope for the human race. We need to know that love is built into the universe, that come what may the God who created us is still for us.

Cynthia Wedel, President of the National Council of Churches, in her Christmas message put it this way: "What can Christmas mean in a world like ours? The tinsel and glitter look out of place. The baby born in a far-off land, with stars and angels and wisemen, seems strangely remote from the violence, tension, injustice and fear of 1971.

But . . . . . we need to remember that it was into such a world that God chose to come in human form - incognito, unrecognized but with a power that changed the course of history. The first Christmas proclaimed that, no matter what mankind may do, God cares.

Christmas comes like a shaft of light into the darkness of human despair. With such a God there is always hope. . ."

The world needs that shaft of light today - just as you and I need it. And the Christmas Gospel of comfort is heard and felt across the land. In a world that changes so fast we can't always keep up, Christmas is the opportunity to enjoy the familiar, to celebrate traditions of our own past, to enjoy traditions that have not changed. There is, in our Christmas observance, a strong identity with the past. There is something reassuring and comforting in a Currier and Ives print of a New England Church on Christmas Eve, with bundled families walking through clean snow, and puffs of steam from sleek horses nostrils. There is something good and healing about singing "Away in a Manger" with the children and remembering how it used to be sung with one's own parents. There is something wonderfully comforting about putting the tree in place, and opening the Advent Calendar every evening, and urging on a child's anticipation that has already reached the bursting point. We do those things because we

experienced them once long ago, and we know - even as we do them - that our children will do them when they have children: and they'll say, as we do, " "That's the way it used to be in my home."

Christmas comforts us: Christmas meets a deeply felt need: Christmas is needed reassurance that some things have not changed and will not change. And of all the impact Christian Faith has had on Western Civilization, this just may be the most important.

We could leave it at that. We could, as we think together on the last Advent Sunday, stop right here, sing Silent Night and go home, hearts aglow with nostalgia and good will. Except for one thing - that strange highway in the desert, and that insistant Biblical them that keeps demanding that men walk in the wilderness once they've enjoyed their comfort. We could well confine our observance of a Bethlehem birth to the comfort and nostalgia and love that it inspires in all men. Except for the fact that the Babe of Bethlehem didn't stay a Babe for long - any longer, in fact, than any other baby. He grew to manhood - and that's the second half of the story.

The temptation to stop is overwhelming: we've been deeply moved by our beautiful children singing about mangers and shepherds and cattle lowing, and that ought to be enough for one day. Except for the fact that this good word of comfort puts us right back on the limb if think about it long enough.

That's why Christmas sermons sound angry sometimes. That's why Christmas keeps coming up a bit ambiguously for some of us. Because there's a whole world out there celebrating the birth of a child: but a world that doesn't give a damn about what the child had to say when he grew up and started talking about things like peace and love and sacrifice and brotherhood.

The Wise Men were the first to experience it. They came to the Bethlehem manger to welcome the child. The cemented themselved secruely into the tradition by bringinggold, frankincense and myhr. Their advent was spent traveling, following a star, and it was consumated in an unforgetable experience in a stable. And then - - - - they had to take another way home. They

couldn't go by way of Herod's palace - they had seen a child and now there was risk, danger, and the necessity of pushing out into the desert on an unknown route.

That's the way it is with the Christ Child. To go to the manger and return unchanged is to miss the whole point. For Jesus Christ - the man - calls his people to follow him out into a wilderness world: out into a dangerous situation where men are bleeding, where men are poor and getting poorer: where children die of malnutrition and rapalm; where racism refuses to surrender. In a letter to the editor last Thursday evening a woman suggested that the ministers of Lafayette ought to preach on racism this Sunday - a rather outlandish suggestion, until we think a while about the kind of man the baby became; and the kind of things he did and said.

Christmas, for the Church of Jesus Christ, and for individual Christians, is not the destination - but the point of departure. Using the Prophet's idiom, it is the beginning of a road through a wilderness. Using a more personal idiom, it is a time to reflect on God's love - and then to rededicate myself to the task of following him on whatever road he choses to lead me.

Comfort and demand: celebration and sacrifice: love and dedication: salvation and hard work. That's the rythm of Christian Faith on this and every day. That's what we have to offer the world.

"For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the governement will be upon his shoulder,
and his name will be called,
Wounderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

Amen.